

PREPARED REMARKS
Congress and Foreign Policy
COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS SPEECH
U.S. SEN. JEFF FLAKE
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Thank you, Doyle, and I want to thank the Council on Foreign Relations for the invitation to discuss Congress' role in foreign policy. While my views haven't changed drastically since my days in the House, one benefit of this new position is that people now seem more interested in these views.

Since cutting my teeth in southern Africa and watching Namibia gain independence, international affairs has long captivated my interest. Having had the chance to serve on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and with such esteemed colleagues such as Chairmen Henry Hyde and Tom Lantos, I am grateful to have the chance to continue that work in the Senate.

In my view, Congress's role in foreign policy revolves around advancing three major goals:

First and foremost, it is our job to protect U.S. national interests by reinforcing U.S. leadership abroad. Second, our national interest is best served when the U.S. promotes and supports the principle of liberty and the democratic process abroad. Finally, just as with domestic policy, Congress should protect U.S. taxpayers from wasteful and egregious spending in our foreign policy.

With those as guiding principles, my efforts in foreign policy have sometimes led me down a different path from some of my colleagues, and often against prevailing or expedient political winds. My effort to modernize our U.S.-Cuba policy is one example.

I have long sought to remedy what I view as a backward policy and a lack of U.S. leadership by pushing for the end of our outdated Cuban economic embargo, an embargo that now represents five decades of failed policy and diminishes the United States' role regionally.

As I see it, ending the Cuba travel ban is not a retreat, but rather a "get tough" policy with the Cuban government. I've often said, only half joking, that if we really want to punish the Castro brothers, we should force them to deal with spring break once or twice.

Furthermore, the ban on traveling to the island is, at best, a needless restriction on the freedom of U.S. citizens, and at worst treats various groups holding U.S. passports differently. The travel ban is difficult to square with promoting liberty for anyone, and I continue to work to see it lifted.

With headlines detailing a failed faux-Twitter program and U.S. funds going to faux-HIV clinics serving as cover for quasi-covert activities – activities which diminish USAID's effectiveness around the globe – U.S.-Cuba programming is clearly in need of adult supervision.

With Congress all but abdicating any role in the appropriations process, this kind of oversight has become increasingly difficult.

Speaking of appropriations, this process has become more dysfunctional each year I have served in the House and Senate. To say it's broken is an understatement. The last time a foreign operations appropriations bill was signed into law as a stand-alone measure was in 2005.

At the same time, legislation to authorize foreign policy initiatives has often gone by the wayside. The House and Senate committees work on important measures, but it's rare that these measures receive consideration on the floor, and rarer still that they are signed into law.

Instead, we leave it to the appropriators to include policy riders in year-end omnibus measures that cannot be amended or even debated.

Clearly, oversight is difficult under these terms. In addition, I think we can all agree that it's difficult to promote U.S. leadership and liberty abroad in a sustainable fashion without congressional effort.

I think we can also all agree, with the threats we are seeing in the Middle East to our interests and those of our allies, that the stakes have never been higher than they are today. Our position in the world has always been stronger when Congress and the president present a united front.

Unfortunately, it appears that the president will continue to undertake actions to combat ISIL without any official congressional authorization of the mission. Even worse, too many members of Congress have all but said they don't want to vote on this. At least not until after the elections.

Since coming to Congress in 2001, I have noticed that it seems Congress has been satisfied with abdicating more of its role in foreign affairs to the White House. In return, the White House has been more than happy to circumvent Congress.

Take for example the Strategic Partnership Agreement, meant to loosely define the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan for a period of 10 years, signed by President Obama and Afghan President Karzai in May 2012.

Among other things, this agreement includes promises that the executive branch will seek military and economic aid for Afghanistan from Congress. It also conferred on Afghanistan "major non-NATO ally" status.

President Karzai sought the approval of the Loya Jirga on this agreement, and the Afghan National Assembly ratified the final Strategic Partnership Agreement. Yet the Senate conducted no votes on this agreement.

For the White House, I am sure it was easier to treat the SPA as an executive agreement because it deprived the Senate of the chance to direct U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

The result is that no congressional buy-in leaves the aid outlined in the SPA at the mercy of the annual appropriations process in Congress. This is no way to treat a strategic partner.

But any vote on the Strategic Partnership Agreement would have been a hard one to take, and Congress has little appetite for tough votes these days. Last summer's debate on congressional authorization of strikes in Syria effectively demonstrated that reality.

As we all recall, President Obama asked Congress to authorize the use of military force to degrade Bashar Assad's ability to wage war using chemical weapons.

None of us in Congress were consulted when the president announced in 2012 that use of chemical weapons in Syria's civil war was a red line that would change his calculus on U.S. military involvement there. Yet we were put in the position of having to tell the president whether he could make good on his threat.

I don't believe the president needed authorization from Congress to carry out the mission as it was described to us, and I voted in favor of the AUMF because I believe that to deny a president the authority to respond to a threat he previously made would damage American leadership and credibility. The purpose of seeking congressional authorization should not be to provide justification for NOT doing something you promised to do.

In this case, the lack of action helped prolong the status quo in Syria, and has enabled ISIL to grow in strength. Further, this absence of leadership sent a powerful message to allies and adversaries alike that the United States doesn't always mean what it says.

Now more than ever, we need to correct that message and reassert the United States as a world leader. We need to tell our allies in the region that the U.S. is going to help them combat ISIL.

What better way to do that than to vote to authorize the mission the president announced last week that our military will undertake?

The president said he welcomes congressional support for this mission but he didn't ask for it, and it appears there will be no push in either chamber to give it to him.

Instead, we will consider providing authorization and funding for moderate elements of the Syrian opposition as part of a continuing resolution.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved a bill to do that in May 2013, more than a year ago. The House Foreign Affairs Committee advanced a similar bill in March of that year.

And so U.S. military action and efforts to combat ISIL in Iraq and Syria will be considered as business-as-usual. And Congress's silence on this will be deafening.

The president needs to ask Congress for its support, and Congress needs to show it by way of a vote.

I say this not because I believe the president is constitutionally bound to get Congress's approval – the question of where the president's foreign policy powers end and Congress's begin was left unanswered by the Constitution.

I say this because securing the backing of Congress on any major foreign policy effort reinforces the United States' leadership. It reassures our allies. Most importantly, it sends a message to our adversaries that the United States is, in fact, united.

History shows that when there is a threat to this nation and the president makes a good case for action, Congress will lend its support.

The 2001 authorization for the use of military force in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks was approved in the House by a vote of 420 to 1. Similarly, the 2002 AUMF in Iraq was approved by both chambers with strong bipartisan support.

Last week, the president himself said that this mission to combat ISIL will take time, and without a voice from Congress to support and sustain him in this effort, I fear this critical mission will be subject to partisan attack for political gain in the months and years to come.

Neither the president nor the Congress has demonstrated leadership in this effort, and the stakes are far too high to move forward without it.

It's no secret that I am not a fan of egregious spending, domestically or internationally. During my House days I fought some pretty lonely battles against wasteful and destructive earmarks.

Foreign assistance is a critical and a necessary component of American diplomacy, which safeguards national security interests. But when that assistance is rife with waste, it undermines public confidence in the value of that assistance to promote American leadership and liberty.

I'm referring to things like the aforementioned Cuba debacles, and other foreign assistance projects that, while well-intended, are not sustainable beyond our mission in places like Afghanistan.

We have a duty to be good stewards of taxpayers' money while being mindful of our role in the world.

Finally, allow me to say a few words about the role of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It will come as no surprise that, as one who spent 12 years in the House of Representatives running for reelection every two years, I think that a six-year Senate term was the Founding Fathers' premier achievement.

But the six-year term's real importance lies not in giving senators a break from the semiannual campaign grind. It allows senators individually, and the Senate as an institution, to look beyond the current administration, particularly in matters of foreign policy. That said, I don't think that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is maximizing its potential when it comes its foreign policy role.

Naturally, much of our time is spent authorizing programs, dealing with ambassadorial nominations, providing oversight for spending, and reacting to events that require our urgent attention. But far too little time is spent probing and addressing the broader context and the trends in which our policies interact.

Scholars from CFR and other organizations are discussing this broader context. There might not be a new world order, but I think we can all agree that the old order – upon which much of our foreign policy has been formulated – has been shattered. The Senate, and the country, would

benefit if these discussions were brought from think tanks and editorial pages into the policy arena.

In closing, if you ask me what I think the role of Congress in foreign affairs should be, I would say it is to ensure that we carry on the tradition of past generations of ensuring that our kids and grandkids can live and prosper in the greatest nation in the world. I would say it is in our national interest to promote freedom and liberty abroad. I would say that we need to ensure that scarce resources are put to the highest possible use.

But before all that can happen, clearly Congress needs to actually want to have a role in the first place.

Votes on foreign policy matters aren't always easy to take, and they can leave you politically exposed.

We are elected to Congress, however, to take tough votes. Given the situation we find ourselves faced with today, it is my hope that we can get back into that business.